

## AN EASTER OFFERING--By MARTHA McCULLOCH WILLIAMS.

**I**HATE to have nothing but cedar—that hard winter has made it so red and fuzzy!" Mrs. Gray said regretfully, looking at the prickly twig she held. "Still there seems to be nothing else. Easter falls just too late for the plum blossoms—the rain last night washed them all ragged. And the pear and peach trees are just fairly budded and not even a Jonquil blooming in the garden."

"It beats me clean and clear!" Mrs. Murdoch returned disconsolately, "why the good Lord should send us this late cold season. I've heard ever since I was knee-high in a grasshopper: Early Easter, early Spring." Still I can't say as I mind about the blooms you've named over. I ain't deceitful to man—why should I try ter be ter my God? And I know He knows fruits ain't the same as flowers, however you may talk about it. Don't you agree He oughter have always the very best we can give?"

"Surely," Mrs. Gray said, making a faint sigh with a lambeth smile.

The set of Mrs. Murdoch's mouth was portentous by the time she knew some daring thought hovering in that lady's mind. But for a little while it was left unspoken. Mrs. Murdoch rambling on: "I ain't for denyin' the chapel looked prettily, all right-lined and bunchined up with dogwood blooms, the way you would have it last year—but I told Mist' Murdoch then and I think so yet, it put them so much in mind of the bushy Arbor at a Methodist big meetin' my conscience wouldn't never let me help to do it again. And Mist' Murdoch said I was right—for puttin' religion all aside, only think of the malfeasance you made tickin' up them big boughs. Everybody knows sweet-heavens air shore to find some of them holes and creep in through 'em to de-stroy all this we've had such a terrible time ter upbld."

"O, I hope not. I can't think the mists did real harm. They were small—so small I can't see a mark!" Mrs. Gray answered, her transparent face blushing as she scanned the church walls.

They were log walls, of fine straight yellow poplar timbers hewn to a smooth face, carefully laid up, and the cracks between pointed neatly with mortar almost matching the wood color. They supported hewn poplar rafters of almost Gothic pitch, which came out between ceiling panels of narrow matched poplar boards. No profanin' brush had touched the wood. Every year it got softer, richer, mellower, in tone. Yet it was Mrs. Murdoch's plan to get the edifice weather-boarded without, painted within. She liked to have things finished, she said—specious churches. It was a plumb shame, downright unreligious, to leave God's house naked as you wouldn't leave your own.

The chapel had begun existence as a mission. Indirectly, Mrs. Gray was its reason for being. Virginia bred and devoutly Episcopal, she had married one of the Tennessee soldiers who marched and fought four years with Lee, and had come with him, settling and unafraid, back to the hill farm on which he was born. Life there had been hard—harder, narrower, than she had dreamed existence could be. But she had faced hardship bravely as became a thoroughbred, clinging and holding fast to but one part of the old life. That was her church, notwithstanding the nearest Episcopal parish lay fully twenty miles away. Its church was in the county town, so it had been doubly hard to go there at Easter in pitifully faded garments and the most ramshackle of equipages, yet she had gone. Further, she had taken her children for baptism, and when one after another they died it had been her chiefest comfort that they were laid to rest with the ritual of her faith.

St. George's had received her with open arms and tried delicately to help her. It had planned to make a minister of the one son left her, her eldest, just as he came to seventeen, his



What else she said Leslie did not hear—for there was Lighton—with dancing eyes.

least he had dragged his crutches in to admire and covet the marvel. Long after his death had broken up the old home, she had wept a welcome to the poor gaudy roses and dahlias as they came to her dear new one. Her big downstairs chambers was performe the family sitting room—all company was entertained in it. Thus the wax flowers upon the mantel had become known and noted throughout the countryside, but she never could outgrow nor forget all they stood for.

"Yes, I said her wax flowers. Don't think, Miss Leslie, you know everything!" Mrs. Murdoch said, with an ugly little sneer. "Not even if you do sit up all night that's that or nothin'."

Leslie looked at her grandmother, flushing like a wild rose. She, too, had heard

Mister Benny Lighton, was tellin' us—me and Mist' Murdoch—about them Eye-tallans churches—said a heap of them was trimmed all the year round with artificial, just the same as a lady's bonnet. And the wax flowers, as everybody knows, looked more like lives one than any plain artificial.

"Mister Lighton says them furriners put wreaths and crowns of 'em on their saints, and even on the Virgin Mary. Of course, I don't hold with that. I hate graven images same as any of you. But them folks air, somehow, say what you will, closer back to the Apostles; so I reckon what don't hurt their religion is plenty of good enough for ours, specially when it's that or nothin'."

Lighton was staying at her house, she presented his interest in the Grays. The Gray farm had yielded no mineral of any sort, so there was no color of business or investigation for his presence

some of the Lighton wonder stories—not told for wonders, but casually, in response to her inspired listening.

Lighton was an outlander who had come to look over the mines. He was looking over, of course, had taken him pretty well everywhere; but, oddly enough, all the ways to everywhere had managed to run within half a mile of the Gray place. He had got in the way of dropping in there to breakfast, to dinner at noon, to supper, and sitting as long after the meal as a man decently might.

The fact in a measure explained Mrs. Murdoch's present mental attitude.

Since Lighton was staying at her house,

she presented his interest in the Grays.

The Gray farm had yielded no mineral of any sort, so there was no color of

business or investigation for his presence

in the sudden heat. She could not save herself from sobbing alive.

Mechanically she followed the service,

trying hard to keep her vagrant heart in

subjection. In this the music helped her,

the quartette really sang very well,

and with strength enough to mask the tears of the melody. But she did not

raise her head fairly until it was

time for communion. What she saw then

made her sink back pallid, with a quick-

ly beating heart.

The wax flowers were not even

ghosts of themselves. The wire stalks,

to be sure, were still upright, and partly

clothed in faded green, with her and

there a remnant petal clinging to their

lumpish terminals that had once flaunted as flower-hearts.

All the rout was

littered with gaudy waxen fragments,

yet at least a handful had fallen to the

floor. Mrs. Murdoch looked unconfor-

table yet triumphant—somewhat she re-

minded Leslie of the dusty-lounging old

in the sudden heat. She had no

spiritual sunshine—in the melting of it she began

to be sorry.

What would Granny do? Leslie knew

how rightly she kept the commandments

—especially that against going into the

altar at enmity with a brother.

She forgave Mrs. Murdoch's

senseless despolishment? Almost with the

thought Granny's band fell over her

in a warm, tender clasp, and looking

up she saw the faded face illuminated. Together they went forward and knelt at the altar-rail.

Leslie never remembered clearly any-

thing more until they were out in the

narrow church porch, with Mrs. Murdoch

facing them. She began to say: "Well,

I don't say another word," Granny in-

terrupted her. "It is all for the best. My

poor, foolish flowers could not last al-

ways. What better fate could they have

than to be in Easter offering?"

"Well, I'm mighty glad you take it

that way—it they'd been mine I should

be real provoked," Mrs. Murdoch return-

ed affably.

What else she said Leslie did not

hear—she was to her

spiritual sunshine.

Leslie was very pretty—her mother's

high coloring blended exquisitely with

her grandmother's chiselled outlines.

Moreover, she had a veritable bird in

her throat, and sang with heart and

soul, as a bird must. She had sung in

the chapel choir until Mrs. Murdoch

had given the melody, which had been

supplanted in her parlor with a fine-

new piano. Along with the instrument,

Mrs. Murdoch had given the opinion

that it was best accompanied by male

voices only.

So for a year past Leslie had sat be-

hind Granny, making the responses

musically, and now and again sounding

timidly a refrain. Young Dyneforth

had protested, but Mrs. Gray was not

to be moved. "We must have peace. We

will have it, at any cost," she had said.

Mrs. Murdoch, greatly mollified,

moved briskly about, bending, squatting,

searching for dust and cobwebs with

microscopic vision.

If we'd only thought in time for

you to practice, you might have helped

sing the anthem, Leslie," she said; then,

after a pause, tentatively: "Nobody can

do your singin' in 'ice, and I've been

thinkin', when Grannie—Augoline comes

home, maybe you and her had better

sing regular."

Mrs. Gray said nothing; Leslie looked

quickly away. Then all of them fell to

work helping black Jinny, Mrs. Murdoch

and right down sorry, Sister Gray—

but whenever thought the weather—

"Don't say another word," Granny in-

terrupted her. "It is all for the best. My

poor, foolish flowers could not last al-

ways. What better fate could they have

than to be in Easter offering?"

"Well, I'm mighty glad you take it

that way—it they'd been mine I should

be real provoked," Mrs. Murdoch return-

ed affably.

What else she said Leslie did not

hear—she was to her

spiritual sunshine.

Leslie was very pretty—her mother's

high coloring blended exquisitely with

her grandmother's chiselled outlines.

Moreover, she had a veritable bird in

her throat, and sang with heart and

soul, as a bird must. She had sung in

the chapel choir until Mrs. Murdoch

had given the melody, which had been

supplanted in her parlor with a fine-

new piano. Along with the instrument,

Mrs. Murdoch had given the opinion

that it was best accompanied by male

voices only.

So for a year past Leslie had sat be-

hind Granny, making the responses

musically, and now and again sounding

timidly a refrain. Young Dyneforth

had protested, but Mrs. Gray was not

to be moved. "We must have peace. We

will have it, at any cost," she had said.

Mrs. Murdoch, greatly mollified,

moved briskly about, bending, squatting,

searching for dust and cobwebs with

microscopic vision.

"As you christened me. I can't tell you